A BRIEF HISTORY OF
THE MOUNT KEIRA TRAMLINE

1839  The Rev W B Clarke, who was a qualified geologist, recorded a finding of coal at Mount Keira.

1848  James Shoobert, a retired sea captain and land-owner, drove a tunnel in what is now known as the No. 3 seam. He then observed an outcrop of the No. 2 (4-ft ) seam about 21 metres above it, in which the coal was of better quality.

1849  Shoobert then opened a tunnel in the 4-ft seam, which seems to have been on the north side of Para Creek. A track was then cut through the bush to the Mount Keira Road where a depot was established about 400 metres west of the crossroads forming the junction with the main south road. The track and the crossroads both appear on Plan A (page 85), an 1855 proposal to supply Wollongong with water.

The first load of coal was taken from this depot to Wollongong Harbour, with much fanfare, on August 27. The coal was delivered from the mine to the depot by bullock drays and dumped there. It was then loaded onto horse-drawn drays and taken to the harbour, where it was bagged and carried on board the waiting vessel, the paddle steamer William the Fourth, and tipped into its hold. [Sydney Morning Herald 10.09.1849] Plan B (page 87) is a line diagram showing the position of Shoobert’s road in relation to later developments.

1850  A second tunnel was opened in the 4-ft seam. This was known as the Albert mine.

1856  Lacking capital to develop the mine, Shoobert advertised all his Mt Keira property to be auctioned on 18th February. [Sydney Morning Herald 02.02.1856] The mine was purchased by Henry Osborne who may have been aware, through William Robson, of another seam some 9 metres above the 4-ft seam. This new seam, 7-ft thick, was later known as the No. 1 (Bulli) seam. [Robson was already known to Osborne through the latter’s coal interests at Maitland] The two lower seams had been opened up along the Para Creek, where they were exposed, so it is probable that the top seam was also found on the creek bed during exploration higher up the slope.
Mr Shoobert's
Mt Keira coal mine

Waterfall about
60 feet high

PLAN A
Courtesy Wollongong City Library
[Original in Mitchell Library]

Proposed dam sites

PLAN
shewing the proposed site for supplying the
TOWN of WOLLONGONG with WATER
1885.
1857  Under Henry Osborne the colliery became known as the Osborne-Wallsend Mine. A tunnel was driven in the No. 1 seam, from which the first 3½ tons of coal were carted to the harbour on 16th April to be loaded on to the steamer *SS Illawarra*. The coal proved of such good quality that the local newspaper acclaimed the mine as “one of the finest in the world.”

*Illawarra Mercury, 20.04.1857.*

The route followed from the mine to the harbour was probably along the existing track established for the Albert mine, bearing in mind that the top seam was only 9 metres above the latter and adjacent to the creek bed.

1858  According to the *Illawarra Mercury* of July 22, “the skips were being let down a steep tramway near the tunnel mouth by a drum and brake system, being tilted over a screening apparatus and then transported to Wollongong Harbour by bullock drays and carts.” This tramway could have been either direct rope or self-acting, most likely the latter, as this would have returned the skips to the top without the need of power. The tramway may have lowered the skips to the roadway established for the original Albert mine.

Demand for coal soon outstripped the capacity of the road transport system, so a tramline to the harbour was proposed. In the same year a petition was presented to the government, requesting improved harbour facilities. [*Illawarra Mercury, 22.07.1858*]

1859  An incline was constructed from the mine to a new depot, situated near the end of the present Gooyong Street. This incline was constructed in two parts, one of 17 chains (342 metres) and the other 24 chains (482 metres), each consisting of three rails with passing loops and both self-acting, ie the full skips hauled the empty skips upwards.

[*Sydney Morning Herald 22.07.1858*]

It is not known if the two inclines were directly in line, but owing to the three-rail system, each incline had to be straight.

The inclines were opened on November 11, with disastrous results. The cast-iron wheel on the braking system of the first incline broke, allowing the skips to run away, and the same thing happened on the second incline. Until the brake wheels were replaced by stronger ones, the previous system of carting the coal was reinstated. From the depot at the foot of the lower incline, the coal was still hauled to the harbour by horse-drawn drays, but the distance was now much shorter.

Following the death of Henry Osborne in March, 1859, the mine was leased to Robson & Company.
PLAN B
Shoobert's Road to Albert Mine
1849

Mount Keira
Summit

Albert Mine

Osborne-Wallsend Mine

Northfields Ave

Murphy's Ave

Robinsen Rd

Gipps St

Gipps St

William St

Gilmore

Tramway

Incline (1859)

Mount Keira Road

Contours (Metres)

Main Roads

Incline (1859)

Shoobert's road

Tramway

Cross-roads

Ft Freeway

South Road

Mount Keira Road

200 m

150 m

100 m

50 m

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Approval for extension of Wollongong Harbour was granted in January 1859. An inner basin was to be constructed, 300 feet (91m) long, 102 feet (31m) wide and 10 feet (3m) deep, the excavated stone to be used to form the outer breakwater. However, no contract was let until late 1861.

1860 The intended route of the tramway from the new depot to the harbour crossed private land owned by Charles Throsby Smith’s family trust, which refused to allow access. However the Trust’s objections were over-ruled by the promulgation of the Mount Keira Tramways Act on the 23rd of May.

1861 The railway from the depot to the harbour was completed in May with gauge of 3-ft 8½ inches, the same gauge as the inclines. The rail trucks were hauled by horses.

1864 It soon became apparent that the current harbour plans were inadequate for the increased coal traffic occasioned by the new Mount Pleasant Colliery railway which had opened in December 1862, so the government agreed to increase the size of the inner basin. The new dimensions were 455 feet by 153 feet (138m x 46.6m), and three high-level coal staithes were built along the eastern wall, a temporary jetty being provided during construction. The new basin was opened by Lady Belmore on 6th October, 1868.

1873 The Illawarra Mercury reported a visit to Mount Pleasant Colliery on the 16th of September, stating that the Mount Keira tramway joined the Mount Pleasant tramway about a mile from the coast near the main road. As this point is in direct alignment from the Mount Keira mine adit along Northfields Avenue, it has been suggested that at that time the tramway may have followed that route. However, no traces of such a tramway have been found. Indeed, since 1861 the Mt Keira tramway had been operating along the line through Smith’s land between Smith and Campbell streets. In the writer’s opinion, this was a plain case of tangled reporting.

1876 The Illawarra Mercury of 27th February described the Osborne-Wallsend colliery in some detail, including the arrangement of the incline following recent improvements. At that time the upper incline was said to have been about ¾ of a mile long (1207m) and self-acting. From the bottom of this incline, the tramway ascended slightly for 100 yards (91m), the skips being horse-drawn to the top of the lower incline which in turn was 500 yards long (457m). The two inclines each had two drums, which is consistent with the three-rail system.
given must have been rough approximations as the total length would take the lower end well past the bottom of the slope.

1878 The rail from the depot to the harbour was widened to standard gauge, 4-ft 8½ inches, and locomotive haulage was introduced to replace the horses.

A screening plant was introduced at the depot and the rail tracks at the harbour were converted to mixed gauges to accommodate the different gauges used at Mt Keira and Mt Pleasant.

1880 A Tee jetty was added in 1880 and equipped with a 15-ton steam crane in 1882. The mixed-gauge track was then extended towards Pulpit Rock at the eastern end and terminated at the Tee jetty at the western end.

1887 On June 21, part of the government railway was officially opened from Clifton to Wollongong, crossing the Mt Keira line at a level crossing.

1888 The government railway was opened by the Governor on October 3, now connecting Sydney to Kiama North.

1889 The Government Railways purchased the Mount Keira line between the level crossing and the harbour for £7,500.

1890 In April, the Mount Keira line was connected to the government railway system by a loop line, thus allowing traffic from the government railway to proceed to the harbour, mainly from Corrimal colliery.

1899 In August, Ebenezer Vickery purchased the Mount Keira mine and property for upwards of £20,000.

1900 When Mount Keira mine opened there was no demand for fine coal (slack), so the miners used forks to load the coal into the skips, thus leaving the slack underground. Around this time, shovels were introduced instead of forks. The full skips were screened at the tunnel mouth and the miners were paid on the weight of the "large" coal. The slack was then tipped over the pit bank, causing pollution of Para Creek where it eventually caught on fire. The slack dump increased in size over the years.

The Federal Coke works, adjacent to the government railway, was opened and used slack coal from Mount Keira colliery, a loop siding being built to accommodate the slack trains. Beaton Park now occupies the site.
1901 The 3-ft 8½-inch gauge self-acting inclines were replaced by two self-acting 2-foot gauge double-track endless-rope inclines. This required changing the skips, track and most of the equipment.

1912 According to Danvers Powers [Coalfields and Collieries of Australia] the two endless-rope inclines were still operating and the underground haulage system was steam-powered.

1912 - 1926 It appears that the two inclines were not in a direct line but were angled slightly from each other. The double track made the system more flexible, making it possible to form one continuous incline by introducing a bend into the system. It is not known when this was done but there is evidence that in 1926 there was one incline with a bend, and a braking station at the end to control the rope speed. The skips had to be unclipped above the bend and re-clipped below it, employing two men.

1927 Hoskins Iron and Steel began their move to Cringila.

1934 Mount Pleasant colliery was closed.

1937 The Hoskins works having become Australian Iron and Steel, the company purchased the Osborne-Wallsend mine and made some major changes. The mine continued to supply coal to the Federal Coke works and also delivered coal to the steelworks along the government lines.

When the mine was bought in January there was no external power source. The fan and the underground rope haulage were operated from independent boiler houses and there was a 5-kilowatt set for charging hand lamps. There was no machinery or lighting underground.

As a labour-saving measure, the clipping station was eliminated by installing a rope turn, known as a “Tommy Dodds”.

1938 A decision by the company to increase production by using machinery necessitated the use of electrical power underground. Initially the power supply was obtained from the old power house at Mount Pleasant which was reconditioned and connected by an overland power line which became operational by November. The steam-operated underground haulage was then converted to electricity.
1940 Port Kembla having captured the coal trade, coal was no longer delivered to Wollongong Harbour. The Mount Keira tramline east of the government railway was taken up, leaving the loop as a siding for the gasworks.

Additional power for the mine was obtained by the installation of a new overland power line from the steelworks.

1941 A decision was made to use the potential of the incline to generate more power by extending the incline rope to the underground haulage engine at the pit-top and coupling it by a clutch arrangement. By this means up to 65 horsepower was regenerated into the system. The incline was still self-acting but its energy could be harnessed as required. There were still two rope systems, one underground and the other along the incline, the skips being transferred at the pit top by unclipping and re-clipping. This arrangement continued until the incline ceased operating in 1954.

1952 By this time there was more demand for slack coal for coke making, so the slack dump below the pit bank was loaded out over three years by bucket loader and trucks. By 1955 more than 100,000 tons had been carted by road to the steelworks for processing.

At first, access to the slack was from the pit top, but as the loading progressed downwards the grade became too steep for the trucks to negotiate. Another access road was driven to the bottom of the heap and a “bridge” constructed under the incline to allow the incline and the transport of slack to operate simultaneously.

1954 Opened in November, the Kemira tunnel allowed direct access from the mine to the steelworks along a separate rail line from Mount Kembla. The incline was now redundant, so it ceased operations and three locomotives were scrapped.

Thus ended more than a century of coal-cartage down the slopes of Mount Keira. As if to underline the finality of this chapter of Illawarra’s history, the Federal Coke Works were demolished in 1975.

Geoff Mould.

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